

House Committee on Homeland Security,
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

The Future of Counterterrorism: **Addressing the Evolving Threat to Domestic Security**

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Rice, and other members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. The terrorist threat has evolved greatly since the September 11, 2001 hijackings. The U.S. arguably faces a more diverse set of threats today than ever. In my written and oral testimony, I intend to highlight both the scope of these threats, as well as some of what I think are the underappreciated risks.

My key points are as follows:

- The U.S. military and intelligence services have waged a prolific counterterrorism campaign to suppress threats to America. It is often argued that because no large-scale plot has been successful in the U.S. since 9/11 that the risk of such an attack is overblown. This argument ignores the fact that numerous plots, in various stages of development, have been thwarted since 2001. Meanwhile, Europe has been hit with larger-scale operations. In addition, the U.S. and its allies frequently target jihadists who are suspected of plotting against the West. America's counterterrorism strategy is mainly intended to disrupt potentially significant operations that are in the pipeline.
- Over the past several years, the U.S. military and intelligence agencies claim to have struck numerous Islamic State (or ISIS) and al Qaeda "external operatives" in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere. These so-called "external operatives" are involved in anti-Western plotting. Had they not been targeted, it is likely that at least some of their plans would have come to fruition. Importantly, it is likely that many "external operatives" remain in the game, and are still laying the groundwork for attacks in the U.S. and the West.
- In addition, the Islamic State and al Qaeda continue to adapt new messages in an attempt to inspire attacks abroad. U.S. law enforcement has been forced to spend significant resources to stop "inspired" plots. As we all know, some of them have not been thwarted. The Islamic State's caliphate declaration in 2014 heightened the threat of inspired attacks, as would-be jihadists were lured to the false promises of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's cause.
- The Islamic State also developed a system for "remote-controlling" attacks in the West and elsewhere. This system relies on digital operatives who connect with aspiring jihadis via social media applications. The Islamic State has had more success with these types of small-scale operations in Europe. But as I explain in my written testimony, the FBI has uncovered a string of plots inside the U.S. involving these same virtual planners.
- The refugee crisis is predominately a humanitarian concern. The Islamic State has used migrant and refugee flows to infiltrate terrorists into Europe. Both the Islamic State and al Qaeda could seek to do the same with respect to the U.S., however, they have other means for sneaking jihadists into the country as well. While some terrorists have slipped into the West alongside refugees, the U.S. should remain focused on identifying *specific* threats.
- More than 15 years after 9/11, al Qaeda remains poorly understood. Most of al Qaeda's resources are devoted to waging insurgencies in several countries. But as al Qaeda's insurgency footprint has spread, so has the organization's capacity for plotting against the

West. On 9/11, al Qaeda's anti-Western plotting was primarily confined to Afghanistan, with logistical support networks in Pakistan, Iran, and other countries. Testifying before the Senate in February 2016, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper warned that the al Qaeda threat to the West now emanates from multiple countries. Clapper testified that al Qaeda "nodes in Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkey" are "dedicating resources to planning attacks." To this list we can add Yemen. And jihadists from Africa have been involved in anti-Western plotting as well. Incredibly, al Qaeda is still plotting against the U.S. from Afghanistan.

Both the Islamic State and al Qaeda continue to seek ways to inspire terrorism inside the U.S. and they are using both new and old messages in pursuit of this goal.

The jihadists have long sought to inspire individuals or small groups of people to commit acts of terrorism for their cause. Individual terrorists are often described as "lone wolves," but that term is misleading. If a person is acting in the name of a global, ideological cause, then he or she cannot be considered a "lone wolf," even if the individual in question has zero contact with others. In fact, single attackers often express their support for the jihadists' cause in ways that show the clear influence of propaganda.

Indeed, al Qaeda and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) first began to aggressively market the idea of "individual" or "lone" operations years ago. AQAP's Inspire magazine is intended to provide would-be jihadists with everything they could need to commit an attack without professional training or contact. Anwar al Awlaki, an AQAP ideologue who was fluent in English, was an especially effective advocate for these types of plots. Despite the fact that Awlaki was killed in a U.S. airstrike in September 2011, his teachings remain widely available on the internet.

The Islamic State capitalized on the groundwork laid by Awlaki and AQAP. In fact, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's operation took these ideas and aggressively marketed them with an added incentive. Al Qaeda has told its followers that it wants to eventually resurrect an Islamic caliphate. Beginning in mid-2014, the Islamic State began to tell its followers that it had already done so in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere. Baghdadi's so-called caliphate has also instructed followers that it would be better for them to strike inside their home countries in the West, rather than migrate abroad for jihad. The Islamic State has consistently marketed this message.

In May 2016, for instance, Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani told followers that if foreign governments "have shut the door of hijrah [migration] in your faces," then they should "open the door of jihad in theirs," meaning in the West. "Make your deed a source of their regret," Adnani continued. "Truly, the smallest act you do in their lands is more beloved to us than the biggest act done here; it is more effective for us and more harmful to them."¹

"If one of you wishes and strives to reach the lands of the Islamic State," Adnani told his audience, "then each of us wishes to be in your place to make examples of the crusaders, day and night, scaring them and terrorizing them, until every neighbor fears his neighbor." Adnani told jihadists

¹ Thomas Joscelyn, "References to the Islamic State omitted from Chelsea bombing complaint," *FDD's Long War Journal*, September 21, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/reference-to-islamic-state-omitted-from-chelsea-bombing-complaint.php>)

that they should “not make light of throwing a stone at a crusader in his land,” nor should they “underestimate any deed, as its consequences are great for the mujahidin and its effect is noxious to the disbelievers.”²

The Islamic State continued to push this message after Adnani’s death in August 2016.

In at least several cases, we have seen individual jihadists who were first influenced by Awlaki and AQAP gravitate to the Islamic State’s cause. Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife were responsible for the December 2, 2015 San Bernardino massacre. They pledged allegiance to Baghdadi on social media, but Farook had drawn inspiration from Awlaki and AQAP’s Inspire years earlier.³

Omar Mateen swore allegiance to Baghdadi repeatedly on the night of his assault on a LGBT nightclub in Orlando, Florida. However, a Muslim who knew Mateen previously reported to the FBI that Mateen was going down the extremist path. He told the FBI in 2014 that Mateen was watching Awlaki’s videos.⁴ It was not until approximately two years later, in early June 2016, that Mateen killed 49 people and wounded dozens more in the name of the supposed caliphate.

Ahmad Khan Rahami, the man who allegedly planted bombs throughout New York and New Jersey in September 2016, left behind a notebook. In it, Rahami mentioned Osama bin Laden, “guidance” from Awlaki, an also referenced Islamic State spokesman Adnani. Federal prosecutors wrote in the complaint that Rahami specifically wrote about “the instructions of terrorist leaders that, if travel is infeasible, to attack nonbelievers where they live.”⁵ This was Adnani’s key message, and remains a theme in Islamic State propaganda.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) has alleged that other individuals who sought to support the Islamic State were first exposed to Awlaki’s teachings as well.⁶

These cases demonstrate that the jihadis have developed a well of ideas from which individual adherents can draw, but it may take years for them to act on these beliefs, if they ever act on them at all. There is no question that the Islamic State has had greater success of late in influencing

² Ibid.

³ U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, “California Man Charged with Conspiring to Provide Material Support to Terrorism and Being ‘Straw Purchaser’ of Assault Rifles Ultimately Used in San Bernardino, California, Attack,” December 17, 2015. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/california-man-charged-conspiring-provide-material-support-terrorism-and-being-straw>); See also: Thomas Joscelyn, “San Bernardino terrorists allegedly studied AQAP’s Inspire magazine, pledged allegiance to Baghdadi,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, December 17, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/san-bernardino-terrorists-allegedly-studied-aqaps-inspire-magazine-pledged-allegiance-to-baghdadi.php>)

⁴ Mohammed A. Malik, “I reported Omar Mateen to the FBI. Trump is wrong that Muslims don’t do our part,” *The Washington Post*, June 20, 2016. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/06/20/i-reported-omar-mateen-to-the-fbi-trump-is-wrong-that-muslims-dont-do-our-part/?utm_term=.dec89331c2fb)

⁵ Thomas Joscelyn, “References to the Islamic State omitted from Chelsea bombing complaint,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, September 21, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/reference-to-islamic-state-omitted-from-chelsea-bombing-complaint.php>)

⁶ The DOJ made this allegation in the cases involving Emanuel Lutchman and Mohamed Bailor Jalloh, as well as others. The Lutchman and Jalloh cases are discussed briefly below.

people to act in its name. But al Qaeda continues to produce recruiting materials and to experiment with new concepts for individual attacks as well.

Al Qaeda and its branches have recently called for revenge for Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, who died in a U.S. prison earlier this month. Rahman was convicted by a U.S. court for his involvement in plots against New York City landmarks in the mid-1990s. Since then, al Qaeda has used Rahman's "will" to prophesize his death and to proactively blame the U.S. for it. Approximately 20 years after al Qaeda first started pushing this theme, Rahman finally died. Al Qaeda's continued use of Rahman's prediction, which is really just jihadist propaganda, demonstrates how these groups can use the same concepts for years, whether or not the facts are consistent with their messaging. Al Qaeda also recently published a kidnapping guide based on old lectures by Saif al Adel, a senior figure in the group. Al Adel may or may not be currently in Syria. Al Qaeda is using his lectures on kidnappings and hostage operations as a way to potentially teach others how to carry them out. The guide was published in both Arabic and English, meaning that al Qaeda seeks an audience in the West for al Adel's designs.

Both the Islamic State and AQAP also continue to produce English-language magazines for online audiences. The 15th issue of Inspire, which was released last year, provided instructions for carrying out "professional assassinations." AQAP has been creating lists of high-profile targets in the U.S. and elsewhere that they hope supporters will use in selecting potential victims. AQAP's idea is to maximize the impact of "lone" attacks by focusing on wealthy businessmen or other well-known individuals. AQAP has advocated for, and praised, indiscriminate attacks as well. But the group has critiqued some attacks (such as the Orlando massacre at a LGBT nightclub) for supposedly muddying the jihadists' message. AQAP is trying to lay the groundwork for more targeted operations. For example, the January 2015 assault on *Charlie Hebdo's* offices in Paris was set in motion by al Qaeda and AQAP. Inspire even specifically identified the intended victims beforehand. Al Qaeda would like individual actors, with no foreign ties, to emulate such precise hits.

Meanwhile, the Islamic State has lowered the bar for what is considered a successful attack, pushing people to use cars, knives, or whatever weapons they can get in their hands. The Islamic State claimed that both the September 2016 mall stabbings in Minnesota and the vehicular assault at Ohio State University in November 2016 were the work of its "soldiers."⁷ It may be the case that there were no digital ties between these attackers and the Islamic State. However, there is often more to the story of how the Islamic State guides such small-scale operations.

⁷ See: Thomas Joscelyn, "Islamic State claims its 'soldier' was responsible for stabbings in Minnesota," *FDD's Long War Journal*, September 18, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/islamic-state-claims-soldier-responsible-stabbings-in-minnesota.php>); Thomas Joscelyn, "Islamic State claims its 'soldier' carried out Ohio State attack," *FDD's Long War Journal*, November 29, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/islamic-state-claims-its-soldier-carried-out-ohio-state-attack.php>)

The Islamic State has sought to carry out attacks inside the U.S. via “remote-controlled” terrorists.

A series of attacks in Europe and elsewhere around the globe have been carried out by jihadists who were in contact, via social media applications, with Islamic State handlers in Syria and Iraq.⁸ The so-called caliphate’s members have been able to remotely guide willing recruits through small-scale plots that did not require much sophistication. These plots targeted victims in France, Germany, Russia, and other countries. In some cases, terrorists have received virtual support right up until the moment of their attack. The Islamic State has had more success orchestrating “remote-controlled” plots in Europe, but the jihadist group has also tried to carry out similar plots inside the U.S.⁹

Since 2015, if not earlier, the U.S.-led coalition has launched airstrikes against the Islamic State operatives responsible for these operations. Jihadists such Rachid Kassim, Junaid Hussain, and Abu Issa al Amriki have all been targeted. Both Hussain and al Amriki sought to “remotely-control” attacks inside the U.S. They have reached into other countries as well. For example, British Prime Minister David Cameron connected Hussain to plots in the UK.¹⁰ And Hussain’s wife, Sally Jones, has also reportedly used the web to connect with female recruits.

Kassim was tracked to a location near Mosul, Iraq earlier this month.¹¹ Hussain was killed in an American airstrike in Raqqa, Syria on August 24, 2015. Along with his wife, al Amriki perished in an airstrike near Al Bab, Syria on April 22, 2016.¹² But law enforcement officials are still dealing with their legacy and it is possible that others will continue with their methods.

⁸ For more on the Islamic State’s “remote-controlled” attacks, see: Rukmini Callimachi, “Not ‘Lone Wolves’ After All: How ISIS Guides World’s Terror Plots From Afar,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2017. (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/world/asia/isis-messaging-app-terror-plot.html?_r=0); Thomas Joscelyn, “Terror plots in Germany, France were ‘remote-controlled’ by Islamic State operatives,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, September 24, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/terror-plots-in-germany-france-were-remote-controlled-by-islamic-state-operatives.php>); Bridget Moreng, “ISIS’ Virtual Puppeteers,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 21, 2016. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-09-21/isis-virtual-puppeteers>); Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, “Bloody Ramadan: How the Islamic State Coordinated a Global Terrorist Campaign,” *War on the Rocks*, July 20, 2016. (<https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/bloody-ramadan-how-the-islamic-state-coordinated-a-global-terrorist-campaign/>)

⁹ In this section, I briefly summarize a number of Islamic State attempts to remote-control terrorists in the U.S. Seamus Hughes and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens have a forthcoming piece on the same topic in the CTC Sentinel (March 2017) entitled, “Understanding the role of Virtual Entrepreneurs in Islamic State-Inspired Terrorism in the United States: The Evidence from Criminal Cases.” According to one of the authors, their study will document the Islamic State’s “systematic approach” to “enable homeland attacks through continuous communications with would-be American jihadis.”

¹⁰ Thomas Joscelyn, “Prime Minister says 2 British nationals killed in airstrikes were plotting attacks,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, September 7, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/09/prime-minister-says-2-british-nationals-killed-in-airstrikes-were-plotting-attacks.php>)

¹¹ Thomas Joscelyn, “US-led coalition targeted key online operative for Islamic State near Mosul,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, February 11, 2017. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/us-led-coalition-targeted-key-online-operative-for-islamic-state-near-mosul.php>)

¹² U.S. Department of Defense, Press Release, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” May 5, 2016. (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/752789/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-in>)

In this section, I will briefly outline several cases in which Hussain and al Amriki were in contact with convicted or suspected terror recruits inside the U.S. In a number of cases, the FBI has used confidential informants or other methods in sting operations to stop these recruits. It should be noted that it is not always clear how much of a threat a suspect really posed and the press has questioned the FBI's methods in some of these cases.¹³ I have included the examples below to demonstrate how the Islamic State's digital operatives have contacted potential jihadists across the U.S.

For example, Hussain was likely in contact with the two gunmen who opened fire at an event dedicated to drawing pictures of the Prophet Mohammed in Garland, Texas on May 3, 2015. As first reported by the SITE Intelligence Group, Hussain (tweeting under one of his aliases) quickly claimed the gunmen were acting on behalf of the caliphate. Then, in June 2015, Hussain claimed on Twitter that he had encouraged Usaamah Rahim, an Islamic State supporter, to carry a knife in case anyone attempted to arrest him. Rahim was shot and killed by police in Boston after allegedly wielding the blade. The DOJ subsequently confirmed that Rahim was "was communicating with [Islamic State] members overseas, including Junaid Hussain."¹⁴

On July 7, 2016, Munir Abdulkader, of West Chester, Ohio, pleaded guilty to various terrorism-related charges. According to the DOJ, Abdulkader communicated with Hussain, who "directed and encouraged Abdulkader to plan and execute a violent attack within the United States." In conversations with both Hussain and a "confidential human source," Abdulkader discussed a plot "to kill an identified military employee on account of his position with the U.S. government." Abdulkader planned to abduct "the employee at the employee's home" and then film this person's execution. After murdering the military employee, Abdulkader "planned to perpetrate a violent attack on a police station in the Southern District of Ohio using firearms and Molotov cocktails."¹⁵ Hussain repeatedly encouraged Islamic State followers to attack U.S. military personnel, just as Abdulkader planned.

On August 11, 2016, Emanuel Lutchman of Rochester, New York pleaded guilty to conspiring to provide material support to the Islamic State as part of a planned New Year's Eve attack.¹⁶ Lutchman admittedly conspired with Abu Issa al Amriki after he "initiated online contact" with the Islamic State planner on Christmas Day 2015. "In a series of subsequent communications,"

¹³ For example, *The New York Times* cited the Lutchman and Sullivan cases discussed in this section as examples of the FBI's "aggressive methods." The *Times* described Lutchman as a "mentally ill panhandler" with "no money." See: Eric Lichtblau, "F.B.I. Steps Up Use of Stings in ISIS Cases," *The New York Times*, June 7, 2016. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/08/us/fbi-isis-terrorism-stings.html>)

¹⁴ U.S. Attorney's Office District of Massachusetts, Press Release, "Everett Man Alleged to Support ISIL Charged with Additional Charge of Obstructing Justice," February 15, 2017. (<https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/everett-man-alleged-support-isis-charged-additional-charge-obstructing-justice>)

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, "Cincinnati-Area Man Pleads Guilty to Plot to Attack U.S. Government Officers," July 7, 2016. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/cincinnati-area-man-pleads-guilty-plot-attack-us-government-officers>); see also: Thomas Joscelyn, "Ohio man conspired with Islamic State recruiter, Justice Department says," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 7, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/ohio-man-conspired-with-islamic-state-recruiter-justice-department-says.php>)

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, "New York Man Pleads Guilty to Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to ISIL in Connection with Planned New Year's Eve Attack," August 11, 2016. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/new-york-man-pleads-guilty-conspiracy-provide-material-support-isis-connection-planned-new>)

DOJ noted, al Amriki “told Lutchman to plan an attack on New Year’s Eve and kill a number of kuffar [nonbelievers].” Al Amriki wanted Lutchman “to write something before the attack and give it to” an Islamic State member, “so that after the attack the [Islamic State] member could post it online to announce Lutchman’s allegiance” to the so-called caliphate. Lutchman wanted to join the Islamic State overseas, but al Amriki encouraged him to strike inside the U.S., as it would better serve the jihadists’ cause. “New years [sic] is here soon,” al Amriki typed to Lutchman. “Do operations and kill some kuffar.”¹⁷ Al Amriki also promised Lutchman some assistance in traveling to Syria or Libya, if the conditions were right. Lutchman divulged his contacts with al Amriki to individuals who, “unbeknownst to Lutchman,” were “cooperating with the FBI.”

On November 7, 2016, Aaron Travis Daniels, also known as Harun Muhammad and Abu Yusef, was arrested at an airport in Columbus, Ohio. He was reportedly en route to Trinidad, but he allegedly intended to travel to Libya for jihad. According to DOJ, Daniels was in contact with Abu Issa al Amriki, who acted as a “recruiter and external attack planner.” Daniels said at one point that it was al Amriki who “suggested” he go to Libya “to support jihad” and he allegedly “wired money to an intermediary” for al Amriki.¹⁸ The DOJ did not allege that Daniels planned to commit an attack in Ohio or elsewhere inside the U.S. Still, the allegations are significant because Daniels was allegedly in contact with al Amriki.

On November 29, 2016, Justin Nojan Sullivan, of Morganton, North Carolina, pleaded guilty to terrorism-related charges.¹⁹ “Sullivan was in contact and plotted with now-deceased Syria-based terrorist Junaid Hussain to execute acts of mass violence in the United States in the name of the” Islamic State, Acting Assistant Attorney General for National Security Mary B. McCord said in a statement.²⁰ Sullivan and Hussain “conspired” to “plan mass shooting attacks in North Carolina and Virginia,” with Sullivan intending “to kill hundreds of innocent people.”

On February 10, 2017, the DOJ announced that two New York City residents, Munther Omar Saleh and Fareed Mumuni, pleaded guilty to terror-related charges.²¹ “Working with [Islamic

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, “New York Man Pleads Guilty to Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to ISIL in Connection with Planned New Year’s Eve Attack,” August 11, 2016.

(<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/new-york-man-pleads-guilty-conspiracy-provide-material-support-isil-connection-planned-new>)

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, “Ohio Man Arrested for Attempting to Provide Material Support to ISIL,” November 7, 2016. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/ohio-man-arrested-attempting-provide-material-support-isil>); See also: Thomas Joscelyn, “Ohio man allegedly communicated with an Islamic State ‘external attack planner,’” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, November 8, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/ohio-man-allegedly-communicated-with-an-islamic-state-external-attack-planner.php>)

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, “North Carolina Man Pleads Guilty to Attempting to Commit An Act of Terrorism Transcending National Boundaries,” November 29, 2016. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/north-carolina-man-pleads-guilty-attempting-commit-act-terrorism-transcending-national>); See also: Thomas Joscelyn, “North Carolina man pleads guilty to conspiring with Islamic State recruiter,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, November 29, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/north-carolina-man-pleads-guilty-to-conspiring-with-islamic-state-recruiter.php>)

²⁰ U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, “North Carolina Man Pleads Guilty to Attempting to Commit An Act of Terrorism Transcending National Boundaries,” November 29, 2016. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/north-carolina-man-pleads-guilty-attempting-commit-act-terrorism-transcending-national>)

²¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, “Two New York City Residents Pleaded Guilty to All Charges in Terrorism Case,” February 10, 2017. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-new-york-city-residents-pleaded-guilty-all-charges-terrorism-case>)

State] fighters located overseas, Saleh and Mumuni also coordinated their plot to conduct a terrorist attack in New York City,” the DOJ explained. Saleh, from Queens, sought and received instructions from an [Islamic State] attack facilitator to create a pressure-cooker bomb and discussed with the same [Islamic State] attack facilitator potential targets for a terrorist attack in New York City.” Saleh “also sought and received religious authorization from an [Islamic State] fighter permitting Mumuni to conduct a suicide ‘martyrdom’ attack by using a pressure-cooker bomb against law enforcement officers who were following the co-conspirators and thus preventing them from traveling to join” the Islamic State.²² Federal prosecutors revealed that the “attack facilitator” Saleh was talking to was, in fact, Junaid Hussain.²³

Also on February 10, 2017, Mohamed Bailor Jalloh, a Virginia man and former member of the Army National Guard, was sentenced to 11 years in prison and five years supervised release for attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State.²⁴ According to the DOJ, Jalloh was in contact with Islamic State members both in person and online. He met Islamic State members in Nigeria during a “six-month trip to Africa” and also “began communicating online with” an Islamic State member located overseas during this time. The Islamic State member “brokered” Jalloh’s “introduction” to the FBI’s confidential human source. This means the U.S. government’s intelligence was so good in this case that the digital handler was actually fooled into leading Jalloh into a dead-end. Still, Jalloh considered “conducting an attack similar to the terrorist attack at Ft. Hood, Texas,” which left 13 people dead and dozens more wounded.

More than 15 years after the 9/11 hijackings, al Qaeda is still plotting against the U.S.

Al Qaeda has not been able to replicate its most devastating attack in history, the September 11, 2001 hijackings. But this does not mean the al Qaeda threat has disappeared. Instead, al Qaeda has evolved. There are multiple explanations for why the U.S. has not been struck with another 9/11-style, mass casualty operation.²⁵ These reasons include: the inherent difficulty in planning large-scale attacks, America’s improved defenses, and a prolific counterterrorism campaign overseas.

In addition, contrary to a widely-held assumption in counterterrorism circles, al Qaeda has not made striking the U.S. its sole priority. In fact, al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri has even ordered his men in Syria to stand down at times, as they prioritized the war against Bashar al Assad’s regime over bombings, hijackings, or other assaults in the West. However, Zawahiri could change his calculation at any time, and it would then be up to America’s intelligence and law enforcement officials to detect and thwart specific plots launched from Syria. One additional caveat here is warranted. Despite the fact that Zawahiri has not given the final green light for an anti-Western operation launched from Syrian soil, al Qaeda has been laying the groundwork for

²² U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, “Two New York City Residents Pleaded Guilty to All Charges in Terrorism Case,” February 10, 2017. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-new-york-city-residents-pleaded-guilty-all-charges-terrorism-case>)

²³ “New York man Munther Omar Saleh admits plotting to help ISIS,” *CBS News*, February 10, 2017. (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/new-york-man-munther-omar-saleh-admits-isis/>)

²⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, “Former Army National Guardsman Sentenced to 11 Years for Attempting to Provide Material Support to ISIL,” February 10, 2017. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/former-army-national-guardsman-sentenced-11-years-attempting-provide-material-support-isil>)

²⁵ The discussion here is specifically focused on larger-scale plots, recognizing that both al Qaeda and the Islamic State have inspired or influenced multiple, smaller-scale operations in the U.S. since 9/11.

such attacks in Syria and elsewhere. There is a risk that al Qaeda could seek to launch Mumbai-style attacks in American or European cities, bomb trains or other mass transit locations, plant sophisticated explosives on Western airliners, or dream up some other horrible attack.

In September 2014, the Obama administration announced that it launched airstrikes against al Qaeda's so-called "Khorasan Group" in Syria. There was some confusion surrounding this group. The Khorasan Shura is an elite body within al Qaeda and part of this group is dedicated to launching "external operations," that is, attacks in the West. Several significant leaders in the Khorasan Group were previously based in Iran, where al Qaeda maintains a core facilitation hub. In fact, at least two Khorasan figures previously headed al Qaeda's Iran-based network, which shuttles operatives throughout the Middle East and sometimes into the West. As I have previously testified before this committee, some foiled al Qaeda plots against the West were facilitated by operatives based in Iran.²⁶

Al Qaeda began relocating senior operatives to Syria in 2011. And the U.S. has targeted known or obscure al Qaeda veterans in Syria in the years since, often citing their presumed threat to the U.S. and the West. I will not list all of these operatives here, but we regularly track the al Qaeda figures targeted in drone strikes at *FDD's Long War Journal*.

During the final months of the Obama administration, American military and intelligence officials highlighted al Qaeda's continued plotting against the U.S. on multiple occasions. And there was also a shift in America's air campaign, from targeted strikes on individual al Qaeda operatives in Syria to bombings intended to destroy whole training camps or other facilities. In addition, the U.S. Treasury and State Departments began to designate terrorist leaders within al Qaeda's branch in Syria who may not play any direct role in international operations. This change in tactics reflects the realization that al Qaeda has built its largest paramilitary force in history in Syria. And while only part of this force may have an eye on the West, there is often no easy way to delineate between jihadists involved in al Qaeda's insurgency operations and those who are participating in plots against America or European nations.²⁷

In October 2016, the Defense Department announced that the U.S. had carried out "transregional" airstrikes against al Qaeda's "external" operatives in Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan. Al Qaeda "doesn't recognize borders when they conspire to commit terrorist attacks against the West, and we will continue to work with our partners and allies to find and destroy their leaders, their fighters and their cells that are planning attacks externally," Pentagon spokesman Navy Capt. Jeff Davis said shortly after the bombings. Davis added that some of al Qaeda's "external" plotters enjoyed a "friendly, hospitable environment" within Al Nusrah Front, which was the name used by al

²⁶ See my testimony during the May 22, 2013 subcommittee hearing: Thomas Joscelyn, "Assessing the Threat to the Homeland from al Qaeda Operations in Iran and Syria," *Testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence*, May 22, 2013.

(<http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20130522/100901/HHRG-113-HM05-Wstate-JoscelynT-20130522.pdf>)

²⁷ Most of al Qaeda's paramilitary fighters in Syria will remain focused on the war against Bashar al Assad's regime and Assad's allies. However, some of the key al Qaeda operatives killed in U.S. drone strikes have played multiple roles within the organization, meaning they can walk (fight on the ground in Syria) and chew gum (plot against the West) at the same time. And training facilities can be used for these dual purposes.

Qaeda's guerrilla army in Syria until mid-2016. Davis added that the jihadists targeted "are people who are from outside Syria in many cases and who are focused on external operations."²⁸

The Pentagon provided short descriptions for each of the al Qaeda operatives targeted in October 2016. On October 17, Haydar Kirkan was killed in Idlib, Syria. He was "a long-serving and experienced facilitator and courier for al Qaeda in Syria," who "had ties to al Qaeda senior leaders, including Osama bin Laden." Davis added that Kirkan "was al Qaeda's senior external terror attack planner in Syria, Turkey and Europe."²⁹ Kirkan oversaw a significant network inside Turkey.³⁰ The U.S. has killed a number of individuals with backgrounds similar to Kirkan since 2014.

On October 21, an AQAP leader known as Abu Hadi al-Bayhani and four others were killed in a U.S. airstrike in Yemen's Marib governorate. The Pentagon tied al-Bayhani to AQAP's "external" plotting, noting that the al Qaeda arm relies on "leaders like Bayhani to build and maintain safe havens" from which it "plans external operations."³¹

Then, on October 23, two senior al Qaeda leaders, Farouq al-Qahtani and Bilal al-Utabi, were killed in airstrikes in Afghanistan. Qahtani was one of al Qaeda's most prominent figures in the Afghan insurgency, as he was the group's emir for eastern Afghanistan and coordinated operations with the Taliban. Osama bin Laden's files indicate that Qahtani was responsible for re-establishing al Qaeda's safe havens in Afghanistan in 2010, if not earlier.³² But Qahtani was also tasked with plotting attacks in the West.

General John W. Nicholson, the Commander of NATO's Resolute Support and U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, described the threat posed by Qahtani in a recent interview with the CTC Sentinel, a publication produced by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.³³ Gen. Nicholson described Qahtani as al Qaeda's "external operations director," saying that he was "actively involved in the last year in plotting attacks against the United States." Nicholson added this warning: "There's active plotting against our homeland going on in Afghanistan. If we relieve pressure on this system, then they're going to be able to advance their work more quickly than they would otherwise."³⁴

²⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, Press Release, "Transregional Strikes Hit al-Qaida Leaders in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan," November 2, 2016. (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/994180/transregional-strikes-hit-al-qaida-leaders-in-syria-yemen-afghanistan>)

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Thomas Joscelyn, "Pentagon: Al Qaeda veteran in Syria was planning attacks against the West," *FDD's Long War Journal*, November 2, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/al-qaeda-veteran-in-syria-was-planning-attacks-against-the-west.php>)

³¹ U.S. Department of Defense, Press Release, "Transregional Strikes Hit al-Qaida Leaders in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan," November 2, 2016. (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/994180/transregional-strikes-hit-al-qaida-leaders-in-syria-yemen-afghanistan>)

³² Thomas Joscelyn, "Treasury designates head of al Qaeda's eastern zone in Afghanistan," *FDD's Long War Journal*, February 10, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/02/treasury-designates-head-of-al-qaedas-eastern-zone-in-afghanistan.php>)

³³ Brian Dodwell and Don Ressler, "A view from the CT foxhole: General John W. Nicholson, Commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel*, February 22, 2017. (<https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-view-from-the-ct-foxhole-general-john-w-nicholson-commander-resolute-support-and-u-s-forces-afghanistan>)

³⁴ Ibid.

Kirkan, Bayhani, and Qahtani are just some of the men involved in anti-Western plotting who have been killed in recent bombings. And these targeted airstrikes are just part of the picture.

In October 2015, the U.S. and its Afghan allies destroyed what was probably the largest al Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan's history in the Shorabak district of Kandahar.³⁵ The facility was an estimated 30 square miles in size, making it bigger than any of al Qaeda's pre-9/11 camps.

The U.S. military says that approximately 250 al Qaeda operatives were killed or captured in Afghanistan in 2016.³⁶ This is far more than the U.S. government's longstanding estimate for al Qaeda's entire force structure in all of Afghanistan. For years, U.S. officials claimed there was just 50 to 100 al Qaeda jihadists throughout the entire country.

On January 20, the Defense Department announced that "more than 150 al Qaeda terrorists" had been killed in Syria since the beginning of 2017.³⁷ In addition to individual terrorists involved in plotting against the West, the U.S. struck the Shaykh Sulayman training camp, which had been "operational since at least 2013."

The reality is that al Qaeda now operates large training camps in more countries today than on 9/11. The next 9/11-style plotters could be in those camps, or fighting in jihadist insurgencies, right now. If so, it will be up to America's offensive counterterrorism campaign and its defenses to stop them.

³⁵ Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "US military strikes large al Qaeda training camps in southern Afghanistan," *FDD's Long War Journal*, October 13, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/us-military-strikes-large-al-qaeda-training-camps-in-southern-afghanistan.php>)

³⁶ Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "US military: 250 al Qaeda operatives killed or captured in Afghanistan this year," *FDD's Long War Journal*, December 14, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/12/us-military-250-al-qaeda-operatives-killed-or-captured-in-afghanistan-this-year.php>)

³⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, Press Release, "U.S. Airstrike Kills More Than 100 al-Qaida Fighters in Syria," January 20, 2017. (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1055727/us-airstrike-kills-more-than-100-al-qaeda-fighters-in-syria>)